

Fort San Jerónimo Faced Fierce Battles, and Then María

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico – Among the ramparts of the Fort San Jerónimo del Boquerón, a small defense battery located at the east of San Juan islet, is the site of historic events in Puerto Rico.

The fort, built in the 16th century and rebuilt in 1799 by the Spanish, has faced fierce battles – and often very bad weather.

The diminutive stronghold named after St. Jerome, the patron saint of archaeologists and Biblical scholars, was crucial in the islet's defense against a British attack commanded by Sir Francis Drake in 1595. Drake failed to take San Juan despite commanding 27 ships and 2,500 men.

Two hundred years later, in 1797, a small contingent of Spanish soldiers joined forces with Puerto Rico civilians to fight British troops who took areas near the fort. Sgt. José Díaz, from the northern municipality of Toa Alta, led 30 men against hundreds of British soldiers. Díaz was killed but the small army prevailed and prevented the British advance toward the San Juan islet.

Centuries later the islet faced Hurricane María, and once again the enemy took a serious toll.

At the entrance to the fort, María damaged six redwood doors. Wooden and metal main gates were destroyed and a 7-foot-deep hole opened in the bridge leading to the main entrance. The hurricane eroded the brick, lime and sandstone coating of the main exterior walls, ripped out stones and bricks, and damaged the lower plaza's guard house dome. Several walls of the upper parapet suffered wind and water damage.

The fort was inspected in March by a FEMA team of specialists in Natural and Cultural Resources, officials from the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, historical architect John Rosemurgy and structural engineer James A. Mason, both from the



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National Park Service.

The inspection was one of 348 assessments by FEMA of historical structures in Puerto Rico, including the Fort Conde de Marisol in Vieques, since María came ashore last September.

“We have received orders from Congress to collect information of all the damage done by Hurricane María for a report and to generate a plan for Puerto Rico’s recovery,” said Brinnen Carter, archaeologist with the National Park Service. “The size of this disaster is serious ... I’ve seen a lot of damaged structures in Puerto Rico.”

Juan Vera Vega, director of the Council of Nautical Archaeology of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, said a major crack was detected in a room of the chapel and water gushes in when it rains.

In analyzing the structure of the fort, Mason looked for cracks, which can reveal foundation issues.

“With the moisture meter I measure how much water is in the walls,” he said, “and that it is indicative of saturation and also tells me about problems in the binders in the mortar.”

The restoration of Fort San Jerónimo is estimated to cost \$1.5 million.

The fort sits at the mouth of the Laguna del Condado across from San Juan’s popular Condado resort area. It is surrounded by high-rise condominiums and the Caribe Hilton Hotel inaugurated in 1949.

The structure was evaluated in 1954 and found to be in poor condition. But Ricardo Alegría, archaeologist and first director of the institute, saved the fort in 1959 and constructed a military museum on the site, Vera Vega said. However, structural deterioration closed the fort for public use 20 years ago. It never reopened.

Carmen Marla López, director of the Built Heritage Conservation Program, said the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, which owns and administers the fort, has been working with the National Park Service to establish a maintenance plan. The institute is expected to stabilize the fort before 2021, when San Juan will celebrate



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the 500-year anniversary of its founding.

“San Jerónimo is a cultural structure in the sea,” Vera Vega said. “I call this small fort the cradle of the ‘puertorriqueñidad’ (Puerto Rican idiosyncrasy) because if we had lost the battle in the 18th century, we would be something else.”

For video of the Fort San Jerónimo de Boquerón assessment, visit www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/videos/164609.

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